The Burlington Theses

Or: Why I Will Not Be Your Prophet of Shrink

I stand before you on the convergence of Entropy and Fate, a retail inventory assignment from hell. With tensions, stress, and a cosmic reckoning already rolling downhill. I present the following in complete and utter good faith and entire sincerity. Not as a resignation, but an acknowledgment of the shared absurdity we have all been asked to fulfill.

1. You demand 100% compliance to systems that are, by your own admission, 90% "common sense." This is not accountability. This is abdication of definition.

2. You preach "best practice" while delegating chaos. You post workflows on every table, then fault us for improvising when those workflows inevitably fail.

3. You expect omniscience from associates but offer no clarity in return. "Tag what looks expensive" is not a policy. It is a loophole for blame.

4. Your security standards are aesthetic, not functional. They are not designed to protect product — they are designed to protect *narrative.* That someone, somewhere, "cared."

5. You romanticize productivity like folklore. You invoke the 4-minute mile to justify the erosion of human labor boundaries — without ever asking what was lost in the race.

6. You seek innovation without deviation. Initiative without autonomy. You want thinkers who don't think, and doers who don't notice what's broken.

7. You mistake quiet compliance for stability. It is not. It is the sound of disengagement.

8. You say, "If something's wrong, speak up," and then punish improvisation with retroactive scolding. You do not want initiative — you want insurance.

9. You confuse standardization with fairness. Fairness is *adaptable.* Standardization is *lazy.*

10. You mistake a rising college town's labor surplus for a license to waste talent. You will cycle through dozens of good workers and never understand why they vanish.

11. And when — against all odds — something human stabilizes here… when trust is built, and morale flickers back to life… that is when you offer promotions.
But only if we're willing to leave, start over, and carry the weight again.
Loyalty is never rewarded with rest — only relocation.

12. You introduce new security procedures — more tags, more checks, more hoops — but you change nothing about the time we're given. Not one minute more. We are expected to move at the old speed while doing twice the work. This is not strategy. It is sabotage by euphemism.

13. These added steps are not protections. They are performances. We perform security. We simulate vigilance. Not because it works — but because it looks good on audit day.

14. If security tags worked, shrink would vanish. It hasn't.
Because shrink is not a moral flaw in your workers —
it is the price you pay for pretending your processes are airtight
while ignoring the cracks that open from the top.

15. We do not need more stickers. We need less denial. Fewer empty fixes.
More admission that complexity without support is just delay in disguise.

16. You sell each new measure like a solution, but treat it like a punishment.
Not because it helps — but because someone, somewhere, *needs to be seen* trying.

17. Markdowns are the perfect lie. The system *knows* what's on sale. It calculates it, tracks it, even prints the tags. But instead of a list, we're told: "Just find them." Every rack. Every shelf. One by one. A company smart enough to generate the sale is dumb enough to make you re-scan the store by hand. This is not oversight. It's outsourced labor through willful negligence.

You expect total compliance with markdowns, but you give no complete list.
Not by item, not by category.
Only the ghost of a hint — a tone, a suggestion — "You should be able to tell."
From what? A red sticker? A manager's gesture?
Whole categories go ignored for months — others get pulled every week.

There is no schedule. There is no rotation. Only the myth of one.

If markdowns matter, then act like they matter. Define the cadence. Clarify the zones.
Give us the map. Or stop pretending we failed to follow it.
"You're missing markdowns," they say. But you can't miss what isn't there.
The item was stolen. Perfectly. Cleanly.
The system thinks it's still on the shelf, gathering dust. In truth?
It left the store weeks ago, stuffed in a purse, walked past a broken camera, and was never seen again. The computer doesn't know theft. It knows *absence without explanation.*

And it blames *you.*

So now you're on your knees scanning hangers for ghosts. Looking for a pair of jeans that *do not exist,* because the system demands ritual compliance with its imagined inventory.

This is the quiet joke of retail: You are punished for the precision of a thief.

Instead of fixing security, they fix expectations.
More markdowns. More audits. More scanning.
Less trust.
Less time.
Less reality.

18. The Triple Beep of Redundant Acknowledgment

When an associate scans a valid markdown item, the **handheld scanner emits three long, proud beeps** — a theatrical confirmation of success,
as if the user wouldn't immediately notice the **literal thermal label** spitting out of
the **shoulder-mounted printer** they are physically attached to.

This is not a harmless quirk.
It is a **nails-on-chalkboard absurdity**, repeated **hundreds of times** per shift.
Especially when markdown lists contain **thousands of SKUs**, each scanned one by one —
because bulk updates or system-synced lists are, apparently, out of the question.

You're already straining to hold a scanner, item, printer, and sticker roll at once.
You're dodging customers, balancing hangers, managing limited battery life.
And then comes the "BEEP-BEEP-BEEP"
to confirm what your printer already screamed in physical form:

Yes, that was a markdown.

There is no toggle.
There is no off-switch.
Just **endless affirmations of the obvious**.

It's the small things that break people.
Not a single moment of cruelty — but a thousand little ones, rehearsed daily, in stereo.

But this isn't just auditory clutter.

You cannot scan another item until it finishes beeping.
Every markdown becomes a **mini timeout**, forcing a pause, breaking flow, shattering efficiency — not for safety, not for clarity, but for *ritual*.

In a list of hundreds, even thousands of markdowns,
this delay adds up to **minutes lost per hour**, **hours lost per week**, and **entire shifts** wasted waiting for a redundant noise to finish announcing a truth you already physically received.

There is no override.
No way to mute it.
No option to multitask.

Just you,

a tag,

and the machine reminding you who's really in charge.

19. - And when the truth *is* found—
when the numbers don't add up, when the backroom is a war-zone, and the sales floor a graveyard of miscategorized product it's treated like a divine revelation. A *mystery.*
Unspoken. Unknowable. As if the universe conspired overnight to create a discrepancy that no one could have seen coming. The people who asked for time? For training? For help?
Now it's *their* fault. They "should have done something." Should have *sensed* the collapse in the same way they're expected to sense what's on sale without being told.

It is not the system's fault. It never is. Because the system is sacred. Your time is not.

So the cycle continues:
You suffer in silence.
You stabilize the chaos.
And when things finally start to make sense—
they promote someone elsewhere,
to go start the cycle *again.*

20. And when the work is done—
not *right,* not *reasonably,* but *fast*— they call you a star. A leader. A natural.
They write your name in dry erase marker at the top of a board no one agreed to race.
A scoreboard with no prize but the illusion of being seen. And if you fall behind?
No one asks why. No one checks the load. They just move your name down quietly,
as if you dropped it yourself. Praise becomes currency. A tool. A leash.
"You're one of the good ones." "You've always been so reliable."
Recognition becomes pressure masquerading as gratitude.

They hand you a badge and call it honor, when it's just a shackle in bronze.

21. They give out hearts.
Little pink paper valentines called "Heartbeat of Burlington." Not in February—
in June, for February efforts, filed under "we meant to."
They pin your name on a bulletin board next to half-torn flyers, and call it legacy. You made a difference. Not *to someone,* not *for something,* but in metrics. In willingness. In saying yes to something not your job at a time not your shift because someone didn't show up and someone else had a clipboard. They hand you a card like communion.
Small, bright, with a corporate smile and the empty taste of compliance made sacred.
"You made a difference." But no one tells you where.
Just that it *helped.*
Just that it *counted.*
Just enough that next time,
you'll do it again.

22. The *Caring Cupboard*
has a $120 budget. Split across three weeks and forty lives.
By week one: ramen, two oatmeal packets, a single can of chickpeas.
By week two: hope.
By week three: the sign taped crookedly reads **"We see you."**
And they do—
leave crumbs.

23. Lockers are provided.
For your convenience. Don't decorate. Don't forget your lock.
Don't leave it overnight. It's *your* locker, unless we need it back.
The key to belonging is not belonging at all.

24. The *Fun Calendar*
smiles from the break room wall— Dress-Up Day! Cartoon Shirt Day!
Mismatch Sock Thursday! Themes chosen democratically by the assigned designer when no one's around. All expressions pre-cleared by HR. Festivities canceled for audit season.
Spirit punished with write-ups. You can wear a graphic tee— but not that one. Not that color.
Not too funny. Not too much. Try again next Fun Day when morale is less expensive.

25. The *Wall of Rights*
stands tall in the break room.
Posters from the Department of Labor—
Unpaid wages? Call this number.
Unsafe work? Report it here.
Harassment? You are protected.
And behind it all:
a laminated copy
of your signed arbitration agreement.
You waived your right to sue
when you clocked in.
You can opt out, they say.
Just ask your manager for the form.
The one no one has.
The one no one mentions.
The one you had 30 days to find
between learning the register
and restocking bras by cup and brand.
The wall is required by law.
So is the silence behind it.

26. -*This Week's Safety Topic:*
Proper Lifting Technique. Bend your knees, not your back.
Team lifts for heavy items. Rest when needed. Hydrate.
Be your brother's keeper.
Meanwhile:
The stairs to the trash: five welded death plates
stitched by a ghost on opening weekend.
Each step a folded razor.
They rattle like judgment beneath your steel-toed shoes.

The trash chute: five feet up.
You hoist bags over your head
like sacrifices,
hope they make it in
without tumbling back
onto your spine.

The welds are cosmetic.
One good kick and they rise like drawbridges.
They say it's fine. No incidents reported.
Because no one bothers to report bruises anymore.

The trash panel swings like judgment.
Outward. Over the stairs.
You walk up with a bag,
and if you're not careful—
it bites.

They added gummy foam tape.
A soft, merciful bandage
on the edge of a guillotine.
Not to fix the danger—
just to hush the blood.

It has tasted flesh.
A forehead.
A pink slash across a forearm.
Now it's padded.
Now it's "safe."
Now it's *your fault.*

27. "*We are committed to sustainability*."
Says the laminated breakroom poster.
As you toss another plastic-wrapped hoodie into the bin.
As you watch the compactor crush cardboard, plastic,
and a half-eaten lunch into one glorious cube of lies.
Overseas hands fold it neat. Plastic over silk. Tape over tags.

They ship it across oceans so we can rip it apart and throw half of it away.

You pull Styrofoam from wall décor and paper shreds
from soap bottles that leaked somewhere between Singapore and Pasadena.
You strip the bubble wrap, wipe the shattered glass off a six-dollar candle
protected only by hope and thin cardboard.
The candles survive. The people don't.
And the trash pile rises. Not in back. Not behind the scenes.
But right here, in the back room, in your lungs, under your nails.

The only thing recycled is the lie.

28. *The customers rob us daily.*
But the cameras point inward.
One screen for every corner of your body, and all of them watching you.
Not them. Never them.
"Be alert," says the poster.
"Report suspicious behavior."
And below that: *"$250–$2500 if it leads to an impact."*
Not justice. Not truth. Just "impact."
The cashiers are our frontline. Smiling through suspicion.
Checking twenties for counterfeits while rushing to beat the "speedy checkout" clock,
selling store credit cards to the very people the cameras won't catch,
and asking for five-star reviews from customers who leave with three stolen items and a free pen.
And if a wallet goes missing? It must have been the new guy. It always is.
"It's not personal," they say,
as they review your locker contents
and check your bag on the way out.
Just procedure. Just policy. Just paranoia.
But when there's a pile of censors in a shoe,
or a trash bag full of tags is missing?

Silence.

The eyes of the store are wide open.
And still, they only look in one direction.

29. The Name Tag: *Convenience or Crosshair*
Everyone must wear a **name tag**. The stated purpose? “So customers know who to thank.”
But the real function is **faster escalation**. Faster complaints.
Faster identifications when things go wrong — no matter how vague or unfair the accusation.

It is not a gesture of recognition. It is a **pre-written accusation template**:
“Some guy named Alex was rude.” “The girl in red — I think her name was Sam — didn’t help me.” “Whatever her name was, it was on her chest. She rolled her eyes.”

The name tag is the **shortest possible path** between a moment of stress and a manager’s office.
It is **instant accountability** with no room for context.

It turns human interaction into **customer-to-agent confrontation.** You are no longer just a worker. You are a **label**, a **scapegoat**, a **button to push when the world disappoints**.

They tell you to smile. To engage. To wear your name with pride. But everyone knows the truth:

It’s not your name they care about. It’s **who to blame when the refund doesn’t go through.**

30. *The water bottle policy:*
Your hydration is now a security risk.
If it’s not crystal clear, they’ll ask you to uncap it.
“It’s just procedure,” as they sniff your bottle for the scent of rebellion, or worse — soda.
So bring a see-through flask, because God forbid you bring lemonade.
That’s grounds for suspicion.
They say it's about theft. But we all know it’s about control.
Because nothing says “trust” like being told to open your drink in front of someone holding a checklist. We used to joke that Big Brother watched.

Now Big Brother thinks you’re hiding vodka in your Gatorade.

Meanwhile, the real thieves walk out the front door with carts of merchandise
and a smile for the cameras that never pan that way.

31. “*Hi, welcome to Burlington.*
If I could have you pause for just a moment...”
A velvet rope.
A security vest.
A quick glance at a camera no one is watching.

It’s not protection.
It’s performance.
They greet everyone like a TSA agent
who lost the plane.

"We’re controlling store entry to ensure a safe and secure shopping experience.”
Unless, of course, someone’s actually in danger.

Then it’s: “Policy says call the manager.” And the manager? They call the cops.
Then it’s writing a report. Then they call corporate. It’s all delay.
Like hanging velvet curtains in a burning theater.

The thieves know this. They walk past the rope. Past the welcome.
Right through the “security experience.” Carts full. Unbothered.
Because the only people being managed are the ones who work here.
The show’s for them. Not the guests.

32. *"Loud and Proud"*: Surveillance as Spectacle
Every customer who walks into Burlington is met with a **mandatory ritual**:
A scripted security greeting delivered by the **Shortage Control Associate**.
It must be done **"loud and proud."**
That’s the instruction. Not just clearly — **projected**.
Not just scripted — **performed**.
So loud it echoes through the **racks**, through the **backroom**, through your **soul**.

You are not greeting customers. You are **declaring fealty to surveillance**.

This isn’t safety. It’s **ritualized theater**.
A performance for the camera.
A constant ping to regular customers and workers, ignored by thieves:

We are watching.

And when **actual theft happens?**
SCAs are **told not to engage.**
Call a manager.
Let it go.
Say the line again.

Security is not for protection.
It’s not even for deterrence.
It’s a **costume**, a **choreography** of authority that creates no power.

Only presence.
Only noise.
Only the illusion that someone is in control.

33. Welcome to the *Shortage Highway.*
A pilgrimage you must take every time you clock out
for lunch, for break, for breath.

Walk the perimeter.

Don't stray.

Don't stop. Smile.

You're not allowed to *just go.* You must patrol. You must engage.
You must *high five* — not literally, of course. No touching.
Just proximity marketing. Look them in the eye.
Make them feel seen. Make the theft feel harder.

This is not your time. Your break is not in sight. It's borrowed surveillance.

Miss a "high five"? Too quiet in your stride? Someone will notice. Someone *is* noticing.

This is the Burlington way: You will make contact. You will be a presence. You will be visible.
Even if your joy is not.

34. *The customer is always right.**
When they say it's broken, you break the price.
When they say it's missing, you remove the tag.
When they say it's cheaper elsewhere, you believe.
The register bends. Policy flexes. Margins vanish.
But when their kid needs to pee? Now they're suspects. The bathroom is sacred.
Too sacred for codes. No writing it down. No telling. Only *escorting.*
You, the associate, become the key. Not metaphorically. Literally.
You must walk them to the door.
You must punch in the code in full view as if secrecy lies in muscle memory.

The code never changes. It's on your fingers. Anyone watching can crack it.

Everyone watching already has. But the theater is mandatory. They must believe it's secure.
You must perform control.
Even as the bathroom floods,
even as it smells like failure,
even as the soap dispenser screams for mercy.

Welcome to *customer care.*
Where you smile as you surrender.
Where you follow them to the bathroom
but cannot follow them to reason.

35. ***The janitor closet is locked.***
Not with a latch.
Not with a handle.
With the same key-ring that opens the safe.
The money room.
The vault of gods.

To mop the vomit,
you must be blessed.

The code to touch bleach
is the same as the code to touch cash.
Security is absolute —
when it concerns filth.

The mop bucket must not fall into the wrong hands.
The Swiffer pads are sacred texts.
The toilet brush, a relic. Guard them well.

And yet, the door is still warped.
The handle loose.
The light flickers like a prophecy.

Inside:
One ancient vacuum,
half a gallon of generic “all-purpose,”
and a broom with no head.

The floor is wet with effort.
The air is thick with Lysol and resignation.
You clean it,
but you can’t *fix* it.
The walls rot behind their holy lock.

But still —
you are not trusted
with open access.

Because this is retail,
and nothing is holy
except the illusion of control.

36. The Grand Hall of Mirrors is *closed*.
A dozen doors. A maze of z-racks.
Enough space for a ballet.
Sealed with a rolling gate.

You see, trust costs money. So does supervision.
So instead of staffing it, we lock it up —
like a memory of what dignity looked like.

In its place: Two tiny stalls built by compromise and lit like a lie.
Just off the register — so close you can smell the returns.

Each stall has a glowing LED, like a traffic light, meant to say:
"Someone is here."
But who? For how long? With how much merchandise?
No one knows.

The cameras glare, but never act.
They are the unblinking gods of a crumbling Olympus.
They bear witness. They do not interfere.

The scheduled "check-ins" are rituals.
Performed without faith,
once every 30 minutes,
unless we forget.

Theft happens in the meantime.
Not out of malice, but invitation.

The room says:
"This company doesn't care."
So why should you?

The customers know. The workers know.
Only corporate pretends this isn't a performance of collapse.

And still,
we ask people to smile,
to suggestive sell,
to read minds,
to offer service
where even *structure*
has abandoned us.

37. ***Even the trash is under lock, camera, and suspicion.***
The janitor closet is locked with the same key as the store's secure cash room—
a symbolic conflation of trash and treasure.

Taking out the garbage isn't a mindless chore: it's a controlled operation.

You're expected to bring a partner. If you're alone, you're breaking protocol.
You're expected to wait. A lead or manager is supposed to inspect every bag.
You're expected to be watched.
A camera directly overlooks the trash area — not for safety, but surveillance.

The implication is clear: **garbage is a potential crime scene.**
Every discarded hanger, broken fixture, or plastic wrap could conceal theft.
Employees are trusted to fold hundred-dollar coats, operate pallet jacks, and open the store — but *not* to throw out a box unsupervised.

This isn't protection. It's *paranoia by policy*.

38. ***Standardized Chaos — The Illusion of Corporate Structure***

Every few months, the store receives "updated flow" and "floor plan" directives — glossy PDFs, hastily printed diagrams, or vague bullet lists labeled as corporate strategy. These updates are **identical for every store** in the region — galleria malls, suburban outlets, cramped city retail units — all treated as interchangeable puzzle pieces in a boardroom fantasy.

But the map has no respect for the terrain.

The new plan might call for three tables where there's a fire exit. Or for expanded shoe racks in a department that hasn't had full inventory in six months.
They might list a location for men's coats where *walls don't even exist*.

This mismatch births a contradiction:
Staff are given rigid expectations, and total freedom — simultaneously.

You are told to follow the plan.
You are expected to *interpret* the plan.
You are penalized when it fails.
You are praised if it works — even if it only worked because you ignored it.

Thus emerges a culture where initiative is punished until it succeeds,
and failure is blamed on lack of "common sense."

There is no flow. Only illusion.
There is no plan. Only plausible deniability.

39. ***Backlog as Blame — The Pathologization of Labor***

When tasks pile up — markdowns missed, freight unprocessed, displays unfinished—
the assumption is not logistical failure. It is moral.

The accusation is not *"the plan didn't work."* It's *"you didn't follow it closely enough."*

Every error is retroactively cast as deviation. Not from a clear instruction — but from an imagined perfection that lives only in hindsight.
If you had truly followed the process— which is mostly "common sense"—
then surely the backlog wouldn't exist.

This is **spiritual gaslighting**, made bureaucratic.

The laborer is asked to confess to sins never named.
The manager is forced to divine where their will was insufficient.
The structure remains blameless. The spreadsheet stays clean.
And when it doesn't, **someone's heart wasn't in it.**

Even **success is not proof** of competence — only a delay of the next reckoning.

40. - ***The Four-Minute Fallacy — When Overperformance Becomes the Floor***
The company preaches optimization like gospel.
The story goes: *"Once one man ran the four-minute mile, others followed."*
What they don't mention is:
none of them worked freight until 11 PM, then clocked in the next day at 7.
Success is not met with relief — it's met with re-calibration.

Do something faster than expected? **Now that's the new standard.**

There is no bonus. No structural change. No surge in pay or support.

Only a nod of appreciation, and a new silent burden to carry alone.

They say you've "risen to the occasion,"
but forget that the occasion was **a collapsing dam** of understaffing, shipment backlog,
and rotating expectations— none of which changed after your effort.

And still, you're told to be proud. To wear the broken record of your performance as a badge.

All while McDonald's across the street is offering $8 more per hour, with benefits, free food, and no inventory audit.

You're told: *"We're a family."*
But the kind of family that **borrows your labor and forgets your name.**

41. ***Scheduling: A Machine With No Driver***

The labor hours are algorithmic —
generated by a system that doesn't know the store, the team, or the workload.
It calculates hours like a machine balancing books,
with **no memory of yesterday** and **no awareness of tomorrow.**

And yet, **corporate calls it "optimized."**

It's then handed to managers —
not as a plan, but as a **limitation**.
A puzzle with pieces missing,
where any correction becomes their responsibility,
but no error was ever truly theirs to begin with.

If the freight shipment is late,
if coverage is short,
if three workers call out and none can be replaced —
blame falls not on the system, but on the person stuck translating it into a workable week.

And of course, there's **no way to check the logic.**
No insight into why hours were cut,
or why full-time staff were given part-time hours
while new hires get 4-hour weeks to "balance the curve."

Associates are left waiting for final schedules that arrive days late.
Sometimes after the week has already begun.
Sometimes changed after they're already clocked in.

You don't get consistency — you get warnings.
You don't get planning — you get a guess and a prayer.
And all of it is justified by a number.
A number no one in the building chose,
and no one in the building can change.

42. ***Process Hours Without Process Thinking***

Once upon a time, the store received its deliveries in the early dawn —
6 a.m. to 8 a.m.
before the doors opened,
before customers flooded the floor,
before anyone had to **apologize for blocking the aisle with a steel battering ram.**

It wasn’t perfect — but it was functional.
Freight cages could roll out cleanly.
Backroom processing could begin without dodging strollers and carts.
And resets, pulls, and tagging all had a head start.

Then one day,

without warning or explanation,

shipping times were changed to **11 a.m. to 1 p.m.**
No memo, no logistics justification, no staff consensus.

Just an order.

Now, deliveries arrive in the middle of the store’s peak —
when sales need floor coverage,
and the aisles are most congested.
Backroom space fills with carts that can’t be processed.
Cages clog the customer lanes.
And associates must choose:
Process freight or serve guests.

And somehow,
the expectations remain identical.
Same freight goals.
Same floor times.
Same audit deadlines.
As if time didn’t change.
As if the customer traffic didn’t double.
As if the building had doubled in size to accommodate both.

But the truckers didn’t request this.
They’re now navigating **Calexico to Riverside** mid-day,
through urban congestion and **parking chaos.**
Everyone suffers.
No one benefits.
And no one explains.

It’s not a system.
It’s just a shift of burden —
from planners to processors.
From paper to people.

43. ***The Cycle of Internal Conflict***

The change in delivery times didn't just disrupt process —
it set departments against each other.

Back of House is told to move fast:
Unload. Scan. Roll. Hang.
Push freight onto the floor before the next truck arrives.
Speed is compliance.
Speed is praised.
Speed is posted.
And so they rush.
Clothes hit the racks sideways.
Hangers backwards.
Tags missing.
Sets broken.
Inventory miscounted.

Front of House is left with the fallout:
Customers asking where the rest of the set is.
Cashiers juggling damaged goods and security tags that won't scan.
Managers scrambling to recover broken shelves while prepping markdowns.

And when recovery is rushed or mistakes are made?
Front gets blamed.

Back blames floor.
Floor blames back.
The **cycle feeds itself.**
Everyone knows the truth:
It's not any one department's failure.
It's that the system expects perfection from chaos.
Speed with no slack.
Volume with no pause.
And instead of fixing the structure,
they watch the conflict.

Let them fight.
It keeps them busy.
And as long as it gets done — eventually —
corporate says the system works.

44. ***The Olive Branch Illusion***

To soothe the growing divide between **Front of House** and **Back of House**, corporate prescribes **"shared labor policies"** — symbolic gestures meant to show unity.

- **BOH** staff are required to "recover the floor" for the first **15 minutes** of their shift — a pause before touching the freight.
- **FOH** staff are expected to manage the **Queue Cages** — pushing freight from the registers to the back hallway cages while also handling customers and checkouts.

In theory, this promotes empathy.
In practice, it breeds silent resentment.

Back of House hates the floor recovery.
They're trained for speed, for volume—
not hangers on the floor.
They see it as beneath their pace.
A fake chore that cuts into freight timing—
one more delay on an already impossible clock.

Front of House dreads the queue cages.
There are always more than there is space.
They pile up fast — especially during rushes.
No room to maneuver. No help.
Just the slow crawl of dealing with **inventory labeled fragile, valuable, or absurdly heavy**,
while being interrupted by customers every five seconds.

Then, suddenly —
The back is ready for cages.
All of them.
Now.

And it's a panic.
Staff scramble to clear paths,
relocate stock,
or "make room" where there is none.

So, neither side feels helped —
only used.

What was sold as a **bridge** becomes a **bitter trade.**
Not collaboration, but obligation.
Not unity, but another **invisible metric** no one agreed to.

45. ***The Myth of the Backroom Printer***

For over **three years**, the **designated back-of-house printers** —

meant for mass, consistent, actualization of missing tags—

have remained **inoperable**.

Not once, not sporadically—

nonfunctional for over 1,000 days.

Every support ticket submitted is closed or ignored.
Every mention to management is met with the same shrug:

“Yeah, we’ve put in another ticket.”

And so the markdown printers—

lightweight, mobile, and designed **only** for labels—

are used for **everything**.

They were not built for this.
They **jam**, they **print slowly**, but **they're all we have.**

This isn’t a store that failed to keep up.
It’s a store that has **adapted to its own decay**.

And still, deadlines loom.
Still, expectations remain.
Still, corporate metrics hold everyone accountable

for **results**, not infrastructure.

The printer is broken.
The system isn’t.

It’s functioning exactly as intended.

46. ***-Illusion of Prevention***

Everyone knows.
The thieves know.
The workers know.
Even corporate knows.

Every security tag comes off with a magnet.

You can buy one online. You can use one at home.
You can walk into the dressing room with it and walk out clean.

So why tag everything? Why spend hundreds of hours a week attaching them by hand?

Because the **tag isn't security**. It's **theater**. It’s a **prop** in the surveillance show.
It says: *We are watching.*
It says: *Someone cares.*
It makes you **pause**, makes you **wonder**, makes you **hesitate**.

But it’s fake.
No alarms.
No ink explosions.
Just plastic and posturing.

Even the **greeting rope** at the entrance—
That velvet line and cheerful hostage speech—
It’s not for you.
It’s for the **cameras**.
It’s for **liability**.
It’s for **the show**.

Because when **real theft happens**,
when someone actually takes a cart full of goods out the door:

The SCA doesn’t stop them.
The manager won’t chase.
The police don’t come.

What matters isn’t stopping loss.
It’s **appearing to try.**

That’s Burlington’s real security strategy:

Keep the illusion alive.

Make workers **perform compliance**
Make customers **believe in consequences**
Make corporate **believe the illusion is working**
Until someone notices the emperor has no tags.

47. ***Policy Over Performance***

At Burlington, the systems don't need to work. They just need to **look like they work**.

Security tags?

- Easily bypassed with magnets.
- Still applied by hand to hundreds of items a day.

Surveillance posters?

- Hanging in the break room and back hall.
- "You're being watched."
- Yet the most common thefts go completely unrecorded.

SCA greetings?

- "Loud and proud" recitations of control and security.
- Repeated for every customer, often to empty air.
- A form of vocal compliance, not a deterrent.

The dressing room?

- One gated room sits locked 90% of the year.
- A smaller two-stall is left open with a camera.
- Neither stops the theft — because **the schedule** is what gets policed, not the risk.

The floorplan updates?

- Generic layouts from corporate, untailored to the actual store.
- Staff are expected to follow them blindly, regardless of real conditions.

The trash inspections?

- A camera watches you throw away literal garbage.
- A manager is expected to verify every bag.
- The same process is circumvented daily just to function.

Markdowns?

- Labeled as "common sense," not logic.
- Scanners beep three times before printing — and you can't scan while they do.

Name tags?

- Marketed as customer care.
- Function as surveillance anchors — direct lines of accountability when accusations arise.

This is the **play-acting of process**,
Where every role is performed, Every beat rehearsed, But no one's actually watching the show.

Because what matters isn't **efficiency**, Isn't **outcomes**, Isn't even **truth**.

What matters is the **appearance**:

- That you're **working hard**,
- That **corporate is in control**,
- That **someone** has thought this through.

And if the show falls apart,
It's not because the system failed —
It's because you didn't perform it right.

48. AXIOMS OF THEATRICAL LABOR

1. The Costume Is the System
What you wear, say, and gesture matters more than what you do. A name tag creates trust. A lanyard creates hierarchy. A shirt tucked in signifies responsibility. None of these affect outcomes, but all of them protect the illusion of structure.

2. The Script Is the Standard
Whether it functions or not, you must read your lines. Loudly greet at the door. Say "pause for just a moment" like you believe it. Print markdowns with patience, no matter how broken the scanner is. Say the name of the loyalty program every transaction. If it fails, say it again.

3. The Stage Is Arbitrary
Floor plans arrive from nowhere. Corporate flow maps are copy-pasted from cities that don't resemble yours. Storage space is fiction. Queues overflow. Back rooms flood. You are not asked to fix it. You are asked to make it look like it never broke.

4. The Audience Is Management
You're not performing for customers. You're performing for auditors, regional managers, camera reviews, and abstract expectations. You don't need to succeed. You need to be seen trying. Appear busy. Appear precise. Appear productive.
If the metrics are wrong, it means you're not acting hard enough.

5. The Show Must Go On
No matter how broken the register, how wrong the shipment, how pointless the markdowns — continue. If you ask too many questions, you're slowing the rhythm. If you adjust the system, you're going off-script. If you find peace with coworkers, expect to be reassigned.
Harmony is the enemy of control.

6. The Applause Is Hollow
"You Made a Difference" cards.
"Heartbeat of Burlington" certificates.
Boards listing your fastest times.
Points systems for candy.
Recognition is a tool, not a gift.
It exists to keep you performing. It is given late. It is given vaguely.
It is given only when performance matches fantasy.

7. The Props Are Broken
Scanners that beep but don't register.
Printers that never received support tickets.
Security tags that do nothing.
Locks that mean nothing.
Cameras watching the wrong thing.
The sets are cardboard and tape.
The actors are tired.
But the show is still on.

8. The Director Is Absent
Policy comes from nowhere. You must obey.
Exceptions are undefined. Expectations change without notice.
The managers are caught in the same performance.
They cannot speak plainly.
They can only pass along the next line in the script.

9. The Audience Leaves Before the Ending
No one is measuring what actually works. No one notices the fire exits that don’t close. No one sees the trash compactor injuries. No one checks the real backlog. The managers know. The workers know. But the show isn't for them.

10. The Play Is a Lie
You are pretending to work.

They are pretending to lead.

The customers are pretending to believe.

All of it could be done better,

With half the theater,

And double the truth.

49. The Extraction of Humanity

1 - When people make things work, the system breaks them to "optimize" the magic.
Friendships, rhythms, trust — these emerge naturally among teams over time. But once a store finds its footing through human effort, it is punished. High performers are relocated, promoted with conditions, or reassigned under vague "development plans," severing the roots of community they helped grow.

2 - "Stabilization" is not seen as success, but untapped capital.
A smooth-running store is viewed not as a testament to shared humanity, but as wasted potential. The logic follows: if things are working, you don't need as many people, or you should split the talent to "scale it." This isn't reward — it's cannibalism.

3 - Moments of peace are interpreted as inefficiency.
When workers laugh, breathe, collaborate without chaos — these are not cherished. They are audited. "How did you have time to be calm?" becomes the question. Joy is seen as excess. Humanity, a margin to be shaved.

4 - Promotions are used as surgical tools, not as growth pathways.
Advancement is never just a reward. It is conditional: "Are you willing to start over somewhere new? Can you drop what you've built to serve the brand elsewhere?" Promotions extract individuals from functioning teams to test their loyalty — not to recognize their achievement.

5 - The system depends on people caring just enough to fix it,
but not enough to challenge it.
Every stabilizing figure is shipped out, self-limiting, or burned out. Every organic system of trust is repurposed or discarded. Every heartbeat is spent proving that people can make even this broken machine run — before the machine crushes them for it.

50. I've stopped pretending this is normal.

Because we can build something real.
Because we can work on something that doesn't eat people to make numbers.
Because you asked me to become an enforcer for policies you won't define, uphold a system you won't fix, and sacrifice my joy for a story that doesn't end well for anyone.
I'm not asking for the reasons behind these decisions. I'm asking why they remain in face of failure time and time again? This is not an attack. This is not an insult. It is a statement of Fact.

I hope you will do something meaningful with it.

— [Name Redacted]
*Former Cart Cleaner, Unpaid Morale Officer, and Accidental Messiah